

August 1, 2005 Congress passed a multinational trade bill known as CAFTA last week, but not without a feverish late night vote marred by controversy and last-minute vote switching. Leaving aside the arguments for or against CAFTA itself, the process by which the bill ultimately passed should sicken every American who believes in representative government. Late-night arm-twisting by House leaders to get votes is of course nothing new. We witnessed far worse when Congress passed the ruinous Medicare prescription drug bill in the dead of night two years ago. Yet even after months of unprecedented wheeling and dealing by corporate lobbyists, congressional leaders, and the White House, the Washington establishment still failed to pass CAFTA in the US House. That's right, when the 15-minute voting period expired last Wednesday evening, CAFTA seemingly had been defeated. Here's how. As the vote progressed, the tally was neck and neck. When the 15-minute period ended, CAFTA had gone down in flames. But pro-CAFTA forces were so determined to get what they wanted, they broke the rules. House leadership ignored the time limit and kept twisting arms and making deals until they finally had the votes to pass CAFTA nearly an hour later. What kind of deals? Well, one member of House leadership told reluctant legislators, "We've got to have you; you tell us what you want." And tell they did. Lawmakers in textile producing states were bought off with promises of textile subsidies. Lawmakers in sugar-producing states were bought off with promises of special treatment in the 2007 farm bill. On and on it went, with promises of new bridges, parks, and whatever else it took to pass CAFTA. Rest assured that you will pay dearly for these bribes used to buy votes. Every favor granted and every pet project funded comes on top of the pork-laden appropriations bills already passed in the House this year. These new goodies will be added to the final House-Senate versions passed later this year. One of my colleagues estimated that the price tag for buying the CAFTA vote will be at least \$50 billion. That's right, \$50 billion to win a vote. Is this what you want from your representatives in office? Perhaps the strangest vote buyoff occurred two days before the CAFTA vote. Lawmakers from hard-hit manufacturing districts steadfastly have opposed CAFTA, arguing that it would accelerate the outsourcing of jobs to nations with cheap labor. So House leaders scrambled to craft last-minute legislation to "get tough" on China, which is the real source of concern for most American manufacturers. A bill was drawn up, and a hasty vote cast, so lawmakers could explain that they traded a yes vote on CAFTA for action against China. One small problem presented itself, however: the China bill failed on the House floor! So House leaders went back to the drawing board, struck some and held a second vote on the same bill the next day. This time it passed, but its chances of surviving the Senate or a White House veto are virtually nil. So members from manufacturing districts literally sold their votes for nothing. Their months of double-talking, coyness, and vote peddling resulted in nothing more than an empty promise. The president's press secretary called the CAFTA vote "a real victory for the American people." The problem is the vast majority of Americans have not even heard of CAFTA, and those who have overwhelmingly oppose it. CAFTA was conceived and created by corporate interests, and to claim otherwise is preposterous. The CAFTA vote had nothing to do with the American public, or even trade policy per se. CAFTA was driven by politics and nothing more. Multinational corporations and political globalists share the same goals, namely the centralization of political power in international bodies and the diminution of national sovereignty. What we witnessed last week was not just the selling of votes, but also a sellout of American control over our own trade regulations.